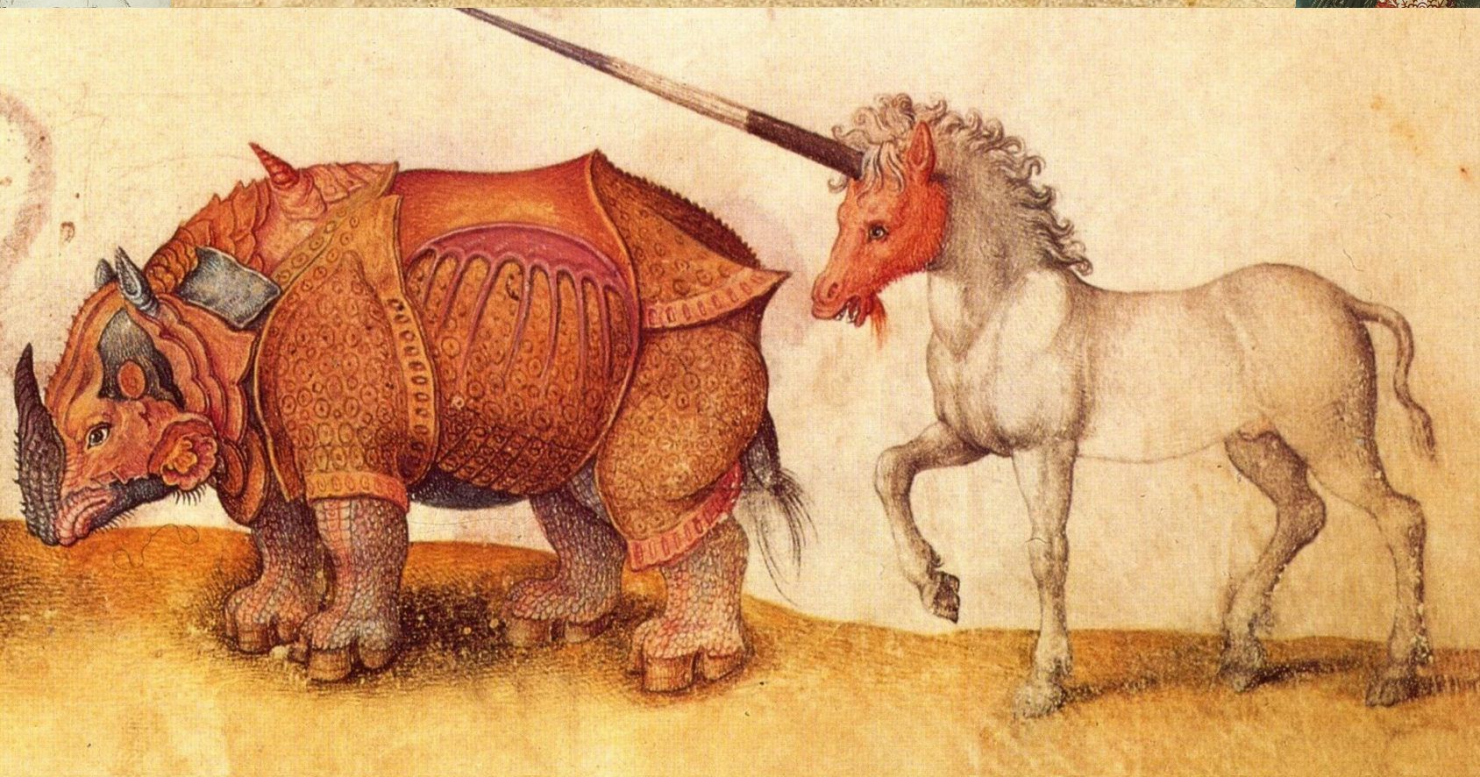
LIFE OF DECEMBRIO

(1392 - 1477)

ALBERT VALENTE



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I

When the honorable Caterini Marazzi gave birth to a baby boy on October 24, 1392, her husband, Uberto Decembrio perhaps decided that it would be best to name his child after his employer, Pietro di Candia, the bishop of Novara. There was a slight variation, of course, and the child's name was baptised Pier Candido Decembrio. This little boy raised under the auspices of a liberty-loving father who held that one ought to familiarize oneself with the bible but also the classics and good Italian literature. The infamous Black Death which carried the bubonic plague took many lives some fifty years prior to Decembrio's birth and there had been a major effort to focus on the humanistic element of life and not too much on the spiritual since clearly one needed worshippers in the pews and laborers in the fields in order to have society running. The efforts that the various Italian city states made in this approach for a more concrete organization of human affairs led to many fruits. Decembrio was born in the city of Pavia in the Duchy of Lombardy, ruled by the ruthless Visconti family. The city was conquered by the Visconti back in 1359 and flourished under their rule, particularly under Galeazzo Visconti, the first Duke, who had extended his power to immense heights and became a formidable threat to his neighbors, the republics of Venice and Genoa. It was his son, the young Gian Maria Visconti who ruled as Duke when, in 1402, he employed Decembrio's father, Uberto.Thrilled at this opportunity, the couple moved to Milan, the very heart of Lombardy, with their children, little Pier Candido and his brothers.

The home of Decembrio received many lively guests in these early days at Milan, one of them being a certain ambassador from Constantinople, Manuel Chrysolara, who, alarmed by the menacing Turkish army, flew to the Italian cities with bundles of Greek manuscripts to save them from flames. The livelihood of Constantinople was already quite dismal and there was little the Italians could do to help revive the fledgling empire but thanks to men like Uberto and many others, the Greek works were brought over which fascinated the incoming generation who were marvelled by the works of Plato and Homer. The young Decembrio began learning Greek and also had exposure to the classics of Latin literature such as Cicero and Vergil thanks to his teacher, Gasparino Barzizza, and also of Antonio Loschi, famous for his wit and admiration of the Latin classics. All these childhood memories were wonderful, however, there was a fair share of chaos, something which Decembrio would know quite well for the rest of his life, for while he read his Greeks and Latins, the duchy of Milan was disintegrating under a brutal civil war. The

young duke had no children and a certain lord by the name of Bonifacio Cane, locally known as "Dog Face" by his peers, had ambitions to overthrow the duke and install his younger brother, Filippo Maria Visconti and thereby be a sort of kingmaker. The humle Uberto Decembrio, aware of these circumstances, tried to forge better relations between the duke and his younger brother much to outrage of Dog Face who threw Uberto in prison, forcing the rest of the family to flee in 1412 for refuge in the Republic of Genoa, called "The Superb" by Petrarch for her savvy maritime expertise.

The maritime republic held many investments across the Mediterranean, she was boastful and had gained an illustrious reputation throughout all of Christendom. The most prominent family was the House of Doria which welcomed Decembrio and his family. It was here in Genoa that he would spend his formative years, his teacher, Paolo Doria, being a man of ample sums, had many treasures which the superb republic brought home, giving the young man the opportunity to see one of the wealthiest cities in Europe. Here in Genoa, he saw men put to work, one particular resident, Giovanni Colombo, worked in the textile trade, his grandson, of course, would leave the city and find employment with the king of Spain and sail to the "New World". At this time, however, in the early 1400s, the city was opulent and independent. The government was entrusted to the "Doge" who gained his power via elections. The doge was Tomaso Fregoso who built many alliances and served as a role model for Decembrio who began to understand the cunning machinations of Italian politics. Fregoso had also an immense library which Decembrio was allowed to peruse, here he continued his studies, improved his Greek, reviewed manuscript, and entered into contact with men from all over. The city's harbor welcomed Neapolitans, Arabs, Frenchmen, Greeks, Florentines, etc… leading to a clearer understanding of the different characteristics of nations and how all men have their own shrewd interest. His earliest work, entitled *De Septem Liberalium Artium Inventoribus Liber,* was dedicated to Fregoso and was a eulogy on the seven liberal arts. The seven liberal arts here being grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. While the young man became acquainted with the liberal arts, the new Duke of Milan, Filippo Maria Visconti, sought him as a secretary. It was one that Decembrio couldn't refuse. He would return not only to his native Lombardy but also be employed at the royal court of the Visconti like his father. While Genoa with its superb riches and lovely seaside was tempting, the court of Milan was an opportunity he could not miss. Gathering his belongings he made the journey in 1419, now at the age of about twenty-six and

made Milan once again his home. Decembrio would grow attached very much to this city and to the courtly life in Milan. Had he remained in Genoa, he could have immersed himself in the world of maritime trade and republican politics, which suffered not from a cruel monarch but from a chaotic populace. No doubt it was also the liberation of his father from prison which played a role in Decembrio's return to Milan, his father had been a dedicated literary man who saw how the court, if guided by an honorable prince, can be much more magnificent than any republic ever could. It was this Uberto Decembrio who first translated Plato's *Republic* into Latin and shaped his sons to be men to be honorable servants of honorable princes.

II

Having left the commerce-loving republic, Decembrio found himself once again among courtly society where elections and freedom of speech aren't exactly the fashions of the town. The Duke, Filippo Maria, was about his age but was no bookworm like himself, here Decembrio had to navigate the world of courtly politics, he recalled how his father was thrown in prison for not keeping his head down enough. Uberto Decembrio, now freed, became a loyal servant to Filippo. But could there be a remedy for the tyranny of this duchy? In 1422, the elder Decembrio wrote his own *De Republica* which praised the rule of princes as higher than the rule of the people. The book served to honor the Duke and show how republics are full of sordid men of doubtful natures and that a sole virtuous ruler was the ideal leader, no doubt the book was influenced by Plato's work of the same name. Yet when the Decembrio family saw the republic of Genoa, as well as the republics of Florence and Venice, they did indeed see the turbulence of the multitude but they also saw books, panegyrics, paintings, and a love of civic virtue. It would be tough to pursue such a policy where Duke Filippo ruled and constantly got into quarrels with these rowdy republics. Here Decembrio would try his luck, not necessarily with a "civic humanism" but with a "ducal humanism". After all, did not Augustus and Ptolemy rule as monarchs and likewise gave rise to the arts? Milan could serve as an example to the sneering republics and as secretary to the Duke, Decembrio would put his best time and effort.

What raised his eyebrows, no doubt, was just how outrageous the court of Filippo could be. The young Duke resembled Nero more than Marcus Aurelius and engaged in all sorts of raunchy adulterous behavior. Before Decembrio arrived in Milan, Filippo had his wife, Beatrice, beheaded for cheating on him with a servant and showing too much interest in politics. This Beatrice was the ex-wife of old Bonafacio Cane (Dog Face) and Filippo was able to gain much power and wealth from this marriage. He also surrounded himself with astrologers and was superstitious and paranoid, hiring a network of spies to investigate anybody and everybody who roused suspicion in his mind. Much like his ancestors, he was despised by many of the Italian cities. But Filippo had a strange habit of choosing competent people and understood that Decembrio was a clever man who had a s share of republican understanding from mingling with the Genoese. This would make him fit as a good diplomat regarding the interest of Milan, which needed to constantly reconcile and negotiate with its neighbors while Italy was aflame with war. He entrusted Decembrio with the task of carrying out legations on behalf of the Duchy.

Indeed not long after Decembrio joined the court, Filippo swallowed the city of Genoa in 1421, ousting the old doge, Fregoso, and granting himself the title of "Signore di Genova" (Lord of Genoa) and appointing as 'captain' the count of Carmagnola, Francesco Bussone to rule the city with a Milanese iron fist. This outraged the republic of Florence, a prime rival of Filippo, who demanded him to liberate the Genoese. Decembrio took part in these negotiations which came at the expense of the Florentines since Filippo refused to remove his troops and Florence herself was full of internal problems. Not much is recorded of this event in his life but it was no doubt a sacrifice for Decembrio to make. His old patron, Fregoso, being ousted by an enemy whom he served was a terrible event to be a participate in, however, knowing his father had been imprisoned and clearly recognizing the furious nature of the Duke, we can surmise that Decembrio went along with it. It was an early experience which matured him and made him better understand the mutabilities of human affairs. Soon after, in 1424, his brother, Paolo Valerio, would die in Genoa, the same year that he got married to Caterina Bossi. Such was life for Decembrio at this time, things did not improve in the following year when his child, Candido Maria, died as a baby. Decembrio did have one younger brother who had a similar passion for the liberal arts, Angelo Camillo Decembrio, who was a a young man at this time and showed a precarious inclination for learning.

He was also sent to Rome in 1425 in a legation to Pope Martin V who was dealing with a deluge of conflicts and, in particular, the heresies of the Lollards and Hussites. This pope also received an embassy from Prince Henry of Portugal who presented him with some slaves he obtained in Africa after sailing down there with his swift new ships. Rome with its papacy was a powerful institution and leaders from all over Christendom needed the approval of his holiness in order to be seen as legitimate. Needless to say, Filippo craved an alliance with Martin in order to establish the best way to move things forward for the Duchy of Lombardy. Genoa under his rule was already faltering and the sale of Christian slaves to non-Christians outraged the church. But much did not come from these negotiations and Milanese Genoa sank in the Duke's despotism while Portugal's maritime prowess grew. Decembrio was also sent to the flourishing city of Venice, *La Serenissima,* in order to obtain a grain supply which growing Lombardy was in need of. Venice, the leading maritime power in Europe ruled by the cunning doge, Francesco Foscari, certainly had reservations against Filippo but was also suspicious of her other neighbors as well. So long as her main rival Genoa lived under tyranny, the republic was able to have more adept

flexibility overseas. Now back in Milan, the court of Filippo spoke a dialect of Italian which was different than these Venetians, Romans, and Florentines. This Lombardian dialect would be prioritized in the court over the Tuscan dialect of Dante Alighieri and the Venetian sailor talk which was so hated by Filippo's government. This dialect of Italian was put into paper by Decembrio when he would translate the old Latin works into Italian. At this time he worked on *De Bello Gallico*, the Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar, opening this classic to a new audience. In 1427, his beloved father died in Treviglio, a small town in Lombardy, at around the age of seventy-seven. The following year he composed his first serious work, *De Vitae Ignorantia*, a dialogue between the author and Zanino Ricci, another court official to Filippo, on the best possible path to a happy life. The author adopts the Hedonist-Epicurean approach whereas his opponent adopts a Cynic-Stoic position. He likewise wrote later around 1430, his *Historia Peregrina* which includes one of his most celebrated original works, *De Genitura Hominis* (On the Generation of Humans), a short treatise largely inspired by the works of Aristotle. Such was the celebrity Decembrio achieved at the court of Filippo but also many challenges. In 1430 both his mother, and his brother, Modesto, had died and the latter left his wife and two daughters who had nowhere to go and so Decembrio and Caterina took them in their home. His other brother, the young Angelo Camillo, went to Ferrara to work for Leonello d'Este, the Marquis of Ferrara. Times were tough for Decembrio and his family, he made complaints against his employer that the pay was too little, but Filippo ignored his requests and set off plotting his next moves for ambitions were soon entering into a bitter conflict leading Decembrio to exercise more of his efforts as secretary.

III

In the 1430s, Filippo began losing his grip on power but held it with impressive dynamism. One such misfortune for him was the election of Pope Eugenius IV after the death of Martin V. Now Rome would certainly be an enemy, and with the aid of Foscari in Venice, the two began their designs against Milan. Florence and Naples too were looking to seize their opportunity and weaken the Duchy of Lombardy, circumstances which ultimately led France to get involved and for Decembrio himself to travel there. The king of Aragon, Alfonso V, was promised to be the heir of Naples but the queen, Johanna II, repudiated him in favor of the House of Anjou in France, making René of Valois-Anjou the heir to the Kingdom of Naples. War began when Alfonso refused to recognize Angevin rule of Naples and began launching ships to take what he deemed belong to him by right. Filippo would assign Decembrio to be a diplomat to the French in his war against Aragon and to the Germans in his war against the Venetians.

Genoa, still under his authority, began a rapid mobilization of their war fleet to rival King Alfonso. Hundreds of bowmen, soldiers, and dozens of ships were part of the expedition yet Alfonso knew that the Genoese secretly despised Filippo and began operations to liberate them from Milanese rule. Decembrio meanwhile was at the court of Sigismund, Holy Roman Emperor, who was keen to rival Venice in the Adriatic. But Sigismund was overwhelmed with difficulties and could not assist Milan very much. It was this Sigismund that was the last emperor of the House of Luxembourg, after his death in 1437, the Holy Roman Empire would be transformed by the magnanimous House of Habsburg. But as concerns the immediate means of Milan and therefore of our subject, there was not much that Sigismund could do. Decembrio ventured to France to secure the aid of the Angevins against the Aragonese who were already breaking apart Genoa and seizing Naples. He knew that France was just concluding her war with England and so went to the city of Arras where a meeting was held to reach a peace treaty for a war that had lasted a hundred years. Circumstances led the English to abandon their claim to France and return to their island. Decembrio saw this retreat as opportune for Milan and visited the heir apparent, René of Anjou-Valois, who was imprisoned yet confirmed his claim to the throne. Filippo had the service of one sharp commander in this war, Francesco Sforza, who took advantage of a weak Rome to conquer the territories of the Papal States. Pope Eugenius, tied up with the various theological disputes of the Council of Basel which threatened his authority, gradually submitted. The partisans of René in Naples defeated Aragon’s fleet and Alfonso was

captured and sent to a prison in Milan while René was welcomed king but Genoa, the city which Filippo held for over a decade, revolted and re-established her independence through the efforts of eight men known as the 'capitani di Libertà', the Captains of Liberty. Alfonso was able to convince Filippo to free him, a mistake he would later pay for. Regarding the Venetians, Filippo had the assistance of the commander, Francesco Sforza, originally allied with Florence, defected to the camp of the Visconti in service of Milan in exchange of having the Duke's daughter, Bianca Maria in marriage.

This colossal war, known as the War of the Neopolitan Succession, certainly rocked the boat for Filippo but it also rocked Decembrio who had many relations made but also broken off others. One of these was with the Florentine writer, Leonardo Bruni, who accused of him plagiarzing his translations of the Greeks and also of a sloppy translation of Aristotle's *Politics*. Bruni also wrote a treatise *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis* (1435) in which he praised the city of Florence, in contraposition, Decembrio wrote *De Laudibus Mediolanensium Urbis Panegyricus in Comparationem Florentinae Urbis* (1435-1436) in which our protagonist lavishes praise on Milan and attacks Florence for its many faults. Bruni, it should be noted, is considered the first modern historian due in part to his categorization of history as 'ancient', 'medieval', and 'modern'. Decembrio began a more firm dedication to his literary career, he translated *Historia Alexanderi Magni* by Quintius Curtius whom he dedicated to Filippo in 1438, two years later he finished a translation of *The Iliad* and Plato's *Republic* which was widely disseminated throughout Europe. This translation of the *Republic* was dedicated to Humphrey Lancaster, the Duke of Gloucester, one of the earliest patrons of the liberal arts in England. This translation was likewise objected to by another translator, Antonio Cassarino of Genoa, which led Decembrio to defend himself against his criticisms. It should be noted that the art of translation was a heavily debated topic, Bruni's *De Interpretatione Recta* being an example of a treatise on the philosophy of translation and the importance of both fidelity to the original language and nuanced adaptations in the translated language.

Decembrio's translation of Caesar was not only limited to the Gallic Wars but he also translated *De Bello Civili* as well as Caesar's account of his war in Africa and Alexandria. These translations, known in Italian as 'volgarizzamento' because they are being 'vulgarized', that is to say, they are being democratized, written in the language of the vulgar, the multitude, hence Jerome's translation of the Bible is known as the *Vulgate*. These translations of Caesar served as

the first translation in the Italian language of the old Roman commander, one exception to this was the Hispanian War, *De Bello Hispaniensi.* In 1441, we learn that Decembrio cut off relations with his only brother, Angelo Camillo, for unknown reasons, it is speculated that it was either for literary rivalry but could also be political or economic rivalry. He also lost a son the year prior, likewise dying in infancy since child mortality was so common in those days. Caterina and Decembrio continued to live in Milan, now as a middle-aged man, serving the same post he had been serving for over twenty years. Angelo Camillo Decembrio continued to live in Ferrara but also made trips to Mantua, where the Gonzaga dukes ruled. This Decembrio is recognized for one particular work, *De Politiæ Litterariæ*, a series of dialogues on how to realize and maintain the literary characteristic of the ideal civilized man. The work goes into detail of poetry, antiquity, and even depicts Leonello d'Este admiring nude art remarking that clothes go out of fashion but the nude remains unchanged.

Not much has been recorded about Decembrio in this time, one contemporary, the savvy scholar, Lorenzo Valla, famous for discovering the falsehoods in the inauthentic "Donation of Constantine", would remark that Decembrio was 'always on the move'. Indeed Decembrio's duties as a secretary constantly made him move around, write letters, wait at court, etc… Our record of his person was taken by the medallist, Antonio di Pucio Pissano, known as Pisanello. The image of the medallion can be found low with the engraving "P. CANDIDVS ANITATIS STVDIORUM HVM DECVS"

Pisanello, *Medal of Decembrio*, c.1447-1448, British Museum, London.

Decembrio was also sent to Republic of Siena and to Rome in 1443 while in the following year he wrote a grandiose funeral oration to Niccolò Piccinino, one of the foremost Italian generals who rendered service to both Filippo and the Florentines. A man who inspired terror in the Florentines and Milanese, he was much written about by Niccolò Machiavelli in his *Florentine Histories*. Filippo had, of course, Francesco Sforza whom he counted to rival Foscari in Venice and Medici in Florence. The city of Florence was overwhelmed with faction but its great banker, Cosimo de Medici, finally won the leadership of the city. He was certainly great at financing not only writers and artists but also Sforza himself who aimed at the court of Milan since he had married the Duke's illegitimate daughter, Bianca Maria Visconti, who, in the year of Piccinino's death, gave birth to a son, Galeazzo Maria Sforza. Now Filippo knew that, having lost Genoa, he could not afford to have many enemies and that with the ever-hungry Foscari and his massive fleet to east, Milan needed to allies.

Now, Filippo, crippled by bad health, knew that he was powerless to compete with so many enemies, and that many plotted for his throne after his death. Not much could hold back Sforza and his Florentine backers, the most likely heir to the Milanese throne. Despite this harsh reality, he knew too that Rome and Venice were ready to pounce on his possessions as soon he died. His nephew, Charles, the Duke of Valois-Orléans, also eyed Milan, claiming it as inheritance while Alfonso was ambitious as well together with the Habsburgs of Austria. On the night of August 12th and 13th, 1447, Filippo's illness took a turn for the worst and while his doctors tried to help him he stubbornly refused them and told him to turn him so that he can face the wall and obstinately departed life for death. He was the last Duke of the Visconti dynasty.

IV

When Filippo died in 1447, there were several claimants to the throne but despite all these claimants, a group of nobles, jurists, and faculty from the University of Pavia set upon the idea to seize power and transform the Duchy of Milan into a republic. A bold idea if ever there was one but they did commit to it and so did our protagonist who was one of the leaders of the revolution. Decembrio had worked for Filippo most of his life and now, already past fifty, he was about to embroil himself in new adventures. One of the leaders, Teodoro Bossi, knew that the duchy's security was under the threat of Charles of Valois-Orléan since the was Filippo's nephew and so contrived to have foreign military assistance. There was no way the duchy, surrounded by enemies, could possibly survive without a stout commander. Hence, Bossi had recourse to send an invitation to Sforza to be a military commander of the republic. This republic was proclaimed on on August 14, 1447 as *Aurea Repubblica Ambrosiana*, or the Golden Ambrosian Republic. The republic had a council, the Captains of Liberty, and their goal was not only to claim themselves as the honorable successor to the duchy but also to outside powers but even to inside as well. The cities of Parma and Pavia (Decembrio's hometown) had split from Milan, choosing not to decided with this adventurous republic. The cities of Lodi and Piacenza immediately joined serene Venice, who flooded Lombardy with her infantry and cavalry. Now Decembrio served in diplomatic roles for the republic much like he did for the Duke, but his role was to defend Milan as she imposed a formidable rule on the revolting cities.

Bossi had communications with Sforza, saying to bring his army over and that he could be Duke of the city, the ever ambitious Francesco rounded up his men, which included his brother, Alessandro, and Carlo Gonzaga of Mantua, as well as a battle-ready army and strapped with Medici money. They marched with up to Lombardy and began a siege of independent Parma and Pavia, much to the horror of the people. But men often put up with the cruelties of a familair master through fear of a foreign one. Hence, Venice was seen as an arch-nemesis and their ships and armies were dreaded, making Sforza a necessary evil. Decembrio wrote in this time a biography of his old employer, *Vita Philippi Mariæ Vicecomitis,* in the model of a Suetonius biography. When it came to his duties to the republic, he began having doubts over Sforza, the condotierro had made great victories but the spoils of war did not distribiute equally to the citizens. Venice was determined to win and Charles was mobilizing thousands of troops in order to enter Italy and claim what his uncle had. There was also Alfonso of Aragon who

claimed that the Duke promised him his territory when the war over the Neopolitan succession was occuring in the previous decade. Rome had also gained a new pope in 1447, Nicholas V, a man of liberal sensibility. While in the Holy Roman Empire, there was Frederick III who was elected as "King of the Romans" but had not been crowned by the pope as Holy Roman Emperor. He was of the House of Habsburg which had recently come to great power and was determined to ensure a balance of power in Italy. Decembrio visited him in 1449 while the war still raged, imploring that Frederick to take the city under his patronage since the people of Milan had grown to hate Sforza. The shrewd commander violated their trust, laid siege to the cities and impoverished Lombardy so much that the townspeople were resorting to all sorts of means to save themselves and their city.

Desperate for resources to fund her daily needs and defend herself, the humble people of Milan listened to the words of a certain banker, Cristoforo Taverna, who came up with a sort of game one can play to win money if Fortune favored them. All the investors, in the hopes of gaining a grand prize, purchased lots and hope that their lot would be the right one, hence it became known as the 'lottery'. This fascinating event is recorded as the first lottery and while it did supply the republic with more support, it was still not enough to keep the armies at bay. There was also a public offering of 10,000 ducats to whoever can capture Francesco Sforza, now allied with the Venetians and swallowing village after village in his quest to take Milan. Gonzaga had sided with the republic and Decembrio openly called Sforza guilty of treason. This put the republic in a desperate plight and they had resourced to Charles and his soldiers. In order to aid the republic against Venice and Sforza, he send the Milanese thousands of men and hundreds of horses and asked for the city of Alessandria in exchange. There was also the duchy of Savoy, led by Duke Ludovico, who hoped for the city of Novara. Desperate in all these measures, Milan signed treaties with both and also received help from Alfonso. Frederick III, alas, did not take Milan under his patronage, but made agreements with pope Nicholas V, whom Decembrio visited as well. Now, there was little Rome could do about the massive armies of Venice and the great sums of Florence. Francesco Sforza now openly declared hostility towards the republic and claimed it as his own duchy, even cutting out Venice from his alliance. Decembrio put all his efforts into amassing as much foreign aid as he can, writing here and there to politicians and nobles regarding the urgent situation. I have included a small letter of his to Alfonso, whereby he

pronounces great honor on the king, remarks how he is in terrible health and that he should not let Milan fall into the tyranny of the Venetians.

P. Candidus Alfonso Aragonum regi salutem.

Veniebam ita letus ad presentiam maiestatis tue, Serenissime princeps, ut ad deum quendam meum in terris viderer proficisci et merito quidem. Omnes enim qui ab inclyto illo duce Philippo Maria relicti fuimus, si novissime voluntati eius credimus, mancipia dignitatis tue sumus. Verum inopinus casus me corripuit. Subita enim valitudine afflictus, ita iaceo ut nusquam pedem e loco movere liceat, licebit fortasse alias. Sic quippe feruntur humane res, ut raro quisquam potiatur voto suo. At si per valitudinem meam tempus aderit, ad maietatem tuam veniam vel orator vel servus. Unum oro, idemque precantur mediolanenses cives, ne patiaris urbem inclytam, totius Ligurie columen ac decus, a Venetis in servitutem redigi, que subacta universe Italie vastitatem pre se ferat. Dignitati tue me humillime commendo.

Ex Urbino, XI augusti 1449.

But circumstances were likewise difficult for these other leaders as well, Sforza and Foscari, seizing mutual interests, had their armies crush Charles and the leaders of the Ambrosian republic were overthrown by the plebeian faction known as Guelfi who were against the Ghibellini, the latter being common among noblemen who were friendly towards the empire while the Guelfi were more supportive of the pope. Needless to say this chaotic dissension completely neutered the city's ability to fight and Sforza was able to defeat in 1449 their army along with those of Venice, for so ruthless was he that he would take and drop alliances whenever it suited him. The new leaders negotiated with Sforza to try and maintain some truce but refused to recognize him as Duke. Meanwhile, Decembrio went over to Pope Nicholas V to secure the assistance from the celestial leader, ensuring that the republic would certainly comply with Rome. But much like his other diplomatic missions, his enemies were quite ahead of him. Milan and Venice signed a treaty, the peace of Brescia recognizing the Sforza as a credible authority and surrendering towns. The doge, Foscari, won the town of Crema, but also had issues to deal with of his own. While the war to choke the republic of food and other resources was

happening, the ancient city of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, was being menaced by the Ottoman Turks and the various Venetian colonies were in dire consequences of being lost. Sforza opened secret negotiations also with Ludovico in Savoy and with Alfonso, who had already taken Naples and its vast kingdom in the southern peninsula. Decembrio, panicking at the situation, was thrilled to find that he could count on Pope Nicholas V for a future livelihood should things go sour in the golden Ambrosian republic. On January of 1450, Venice mobilized troops on the Adda river and occupied the town of Válsassina. The Milanese finally struck back, led by a popular Sforza member from within, Gaspare da Vimercate, who charged at the Venetians, concentraing all the city's forces on this enemy while negotiating with Sforza who entered the city with wagons and wagons of food, much to delight of the populace who made him their new leader, starting the celebrated Sforza dynasty of Milan. They did not bother to think that Sforza had broke Parma and Pavia and dined with Milan's enemies nor that his wife was a bastard daughter of their former count, his charity and the fear of threats was enough to make Milan glad to install him as her new Duke. But Decembrio, horrified by the disastrous collapse of the republic, feared for his life. Fortune favored him, however, for what better offer could he get han to work for the man on Saint Peter's throne, Nicholas V? Indeed, once the republic fell, he quickly made his way to the Vatican with his wife where, in 1450, they started a new chapter in their lives.

V

It must have been quite marvelous for Decembrio to work in the city of Rome, here he would see the old Colosseum, the baths of Caracalla, and the great architectural works of the eternal city. Indeed, Nicholas V was an admirer of history and the liberal arts, so much so that he commissioned Decembrio to begin translating the *Roman History* of Appian of Alexandria and the *Library of History* by Diodorus of Sicily. Nicholas also admired classical architecture that he begin sketching out ideas to renovate Saint Peter's Basilica, here he took material from the ancient basilica of Neptune, and began adorning the Vatican Hill with all sorts of grandiose elements not only to rival the secular part of the city, centered on the Capitoline Hill, but also to strengthen his vision of the church. Much of the Christian world was struggling and factions were erupting everywhere; in 1452 he received envoys from the emperor Constantine XI Palaeulogus who informed him of an overwhelming siege in Constantinople by the Muslim Turks. The pope did all he can to fund the declining empire as did Venice and the other cities, but such efforts were not enough. Nicholas, however, also became known for his bull, *Dum Diversas* (1452), whereby he sanctioned the enslavement of African pagans now in posession of Afonso V, the Portuguese king, not to be confused with Alfonso V, the king of Aragon, both were kings simultaneously for twenty years.

Decembrio himself could have been disappointed by these calamities in Constantinople, but perhaps more so for the countless Greek manuscripts and the old treasures of the classical world. The papacy of Nicholas V, despite being ruthlessly against 'pagans and saracens' had a modest appreciation of the Greek and Roman classics. So much so that he even hired Lorenzo Valla to work for him. Here Decembrio was more at ease, he always preferred literature and *studia humanitatis* as opposed to cut-throat politics. His old Milan was under the tyranny of Francesco Sforza and his golden republic collapsed. But great connections were made during this Roman period that it greatly led to a further bloom in his literary career. But the sojourn in Rome also came with certain enemies, among them was a gentleman by the name of Francesco Filelfo, a gentleman who had studied in Venice and had the opportunity to visit Constantinople where his hands perused a variety of manuscripts. Now Decembrio despised Filelfo and saw him as a reprobrate and sycophant to Sforza due to his epic poem the "Sforziad" which detailed the glories of Francesco's conquests and featured Decembrio as a base character against the poem's hero. Rome was a competitive place, leading Decembrio to strengthen ties with Alfonso, whom

he dedicated a short book on the history of Rome, *Romanæ historiæ brevis epitoma*, a book started by his father which he completed. Roman history occupied greatly our protagonist and his drive to translate the old works. One day in 1453, a number of envoys reached Rome with terrible news; the capital of the Eastern Roman empire, Constantinople, has fallen to the worshippers of Muhammed, sending shockwaves throughout all of Christendom. There was, however, not much the entangled cities of Italy could do. The recent defeat of the Christian forces in Varna in 1444, showed that the sultan's armies were formidable despite a massive coalition and naval assistance. But with this defeat, the Greek scholars fled to Italy, bringing with them many manuscripts and copies of ancient literature.

At this time, he was an envoy in Milan, attempting to mend things with Sforza which he was able to successfully do either perhaps through his understanding of the Milanese interests or of Sforza's suspicions regarding his current allies. But Decembrio did not seek to work for Sforza, he merely wanted to reconcile with him, it certainly came at the right moment for news had reached him while he was in Milan that Pope Nicholas died and that the new pope was Alfonso de Borgia of Aragon, who gained the title of Callixtus III. He was still working at this time on the enormous *Library of History* by Diodorus Siculus but since the old pope died he now dedicated it to Alfonso, whom he sought employment from. What could one say other than that Decembrio began growing more picky with who he worked for? Callixtus could not give him the same benefits as Nicholas and with Sforza in Milan, the best option for him would be to seek the patronage of Alfonso, whose lavish court in Naples had grown immensely. A massive plague had also hit Rome and Decembrio was forced to quarantine, he took this time also to write another original work, *De Origine Fidei* meaning "On The Origin of the Faith", dedicated to the ducal treasurer, Ranieri Vancauli, whereby the origins of Christianity and its history from the time of Jesus to Frederic III are told. The work takes a lot of classical sources into consideration such as Orosius, Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, but also modern ones such as Flavio Biondo who worked with him at Rome and is considered one of the first archaeologists. A fascinating work, the sections are divided into two, one discussing Christianity in the Roman empire and the second in its spread through the Germanic world and the various alliances made between Christian kingdoms. The new pope, Callixtus III, continued to employ Decembrio, but was not on the same terms with him as the Nicholas, but our protagonist remained in his post until August of 1456 where he was invited to Naples at the request of the magnanimous king, Alfonso V.

Enamored by this prospect, Decembrio departed to a new city, this time to work for a king. He had already in his curriculum vitae experience in Genoa, Milan, and Rome, but Naples would be a city that would dazzle him just as quickly as it would disappoint him. For just as Rome was excellent for him under Nicholas but mediocre under Callixtus, so too would the selective Decembrio face similar circumstances in Naples.

VI

While the primary material on Decembrio's early life at the Visconti court is scant, many letters, however, are preserved during this later period such as the letters he wrote to the king. He had agreed to a good salary and a lifelong pension, Alfonso allowed him and his wife to live in the palace. A turn of fortune for Decembrio indeed, he also began to cultivate relations with Sforza now that he no longer depended on the man since he had the backing of so illustrious a king who ruled half of Italy together with the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. Francesco had managed to establish peace with the different cities through the peace of Lodi, but his ally in Florence, Cosimo de Medici, greatly feared the influence of Venice on the mainland and the threat it could have to Milan's finances. Venice, now ruled by Foscari's successor, Pasquale Malapiero, on the other hand, had a monopoly on the Levantine trade and with the Turks threatening their possessions, they had resolved to push most of their energy in countering this threat. Decembrio, on the other hand, focused his attention on the diplomatic approach between Naples, Rome, and Milan. It is a curious but perhaps not too surprising that he did not have much luck with Florence and Venice, the two powerful republics that are most remembered for their greatness in the humanities. Much like his father, his service to Duke perhaps engendered in him the instinct to prefer the regal courtly life as opposed to the discord of republics, which he himself experienced at first hand instead of reading about it in Plato. We see, moreover, how he found himself quite at home in the court of Alfonso at Naples with her vast maritime riches. One writer who also worked under Alfonso was Andrea Beccadelli, known as Panormita, outraged Decembrio with his erotic work, *Hermaphroditus,* a collection of erotic poems which mentions all sorts of drunkenness and raunchy fornication that shocked polite society. One supporter of it was Guarino Veronese, another famous Greek scholar of the age. Decemberio also became familiar with the great Greek scholar, Theodorus Gaza, who fled Greece during the Ottoman conquest and found several jobs up and down Italy until finally settling in Naples. Our protagonist read the Greek's *Carmina Antonii* which he complemented. This Theodorus Gaza also had as a student Demetrios Chalkokondyles, who, in 1488, would create the first printed edition of Homer. It was during this time, in the city of Mainz, a revolution would occur that would indirectly impact Decembrio, an inventor by the name of Johannes Gutenberg had created a bible with a moveable-type printer, leading to a cultural revolution much to the chagrin of

scribes and hand-copyists of which Decembrio was a part of but one which would enhance his legacy as a translator and renaissance man.

In June of 1458, while attending meetings at the Sforza court as a legation to Alfonso, he learned that the King had died, Decembrio froze in panic. The great king had been a blessing for his life but his bastard son, Ferdinand I, was too much of a risk to take as Decembrio approached his seventieth birthday. In accordance with his tact, he maintained his position in Naples as willingly or unwillingly took Ferdinand I as her new king. A formidable man, Ferdinand was illegitimate, the child Alfonso had with a Moor servant and a man who arouse the fury of many. Alarmed at his taking power, pope Callixtus declared the throne of Naples vacant, refusing to recognize him. It seemed once more that a brutal war of succession began to approach Italy. By some miracle, however, Callixtus died in August, and the new pope, Pius II, immediately recognized Ferdinand as the heir to the throne. One contender did not agree to this, however, another Angevin, Jean II of Anjou, the son of René who claimed the title earlier. Thus it was that the Angevin-Aragonese war began. Looking to avoid calamity, Decembrio quit his service to Ferdinand and stayed in Milan, hoping that things with Francesco could be reconciled. He did serve as podestà to the city of Urbino under Count Federico III da Montefeltro and visited Rome once more to greet Pius II, honoring him with a congratulations on attaining the papacy from Francesco Sforza. No doubt, Decembrio was at a loss of what to do. There was his growing regarding who he worked for but there was also a younger generation of men who aggressively competed for the best positions in the best cities. Sforza meanwhile was dealing with Genoa, attempting to clamp down on that republic ever since they broke free from Filippo. Truly if there was a better time to submit a job application it would have been now, but whether to Rome or Milan, the question was difficult. Decembrio, explored the vast opportunities for patronage, not wanting anything with the chaotic Kingdom of Naples and the pornographic Panormita who became greatly elated in Naples, founding even his own academy.

In truth, Decembrio preferred to work in Milan as opposed to Rome, In 1460, he decided to write a biography on Sforza, something which ten years prior was unthinkable for him. The work was titled *Adnotatio rerum gestarum in vita illustrissimi Francisci Sfortiae quarti Mediolanensium ducis,* or ‘Record of Events in the Life of the Most Illustrious Francesco Sforza, Fourth Duke of Milan’. Perhaps it was either through homesickness or better financial opportunity that made him reconcile with Sforza, after all, he had been living in Milan for most

of his life and had great admiration for the city. The court of Milan certainly had a number of lively characters, including the sycophantic Filelfo, whom Decembrio had to deal with back in Rome. The secretary of the Duke, Vincenzo Amidano, welcomed Decembrio's biography but scolded him for certain omissions regarding Sforza's conquests. Our protagonist defended himself by remarking that he had not the information at hand to write about it and would soon all delightful details in an upcoming poem. Another work he dedicated to Sforza at this time was his *De Humani Animi Immortalitate*, inspired largely by Augustine's *De Spiritu et Anima.* Browsing through his letters, we see that Decembrio had a keen interest on these topics but such was his approach to many things. The man enjoyed the study of the humanities and whether it was on theology, history and even how women gave birth to babies, such topics interested him.

Another patron which he found worthy to dedicate a work to was Ludovico Gonzaga of Mantua, to him we have a short book on animals which even feature impressive illustrations of mythical creatures. The work was inspired by Aristotle's *History of Animals* which was translated into Arabic by Avicenna and then into Latin by Michael Scot two centuries before Decembrio. The work that he wrote, *De Natura Avium et Animalium*, is currently in the Vatican library and its digitalized version preserves very well the details on the creatures. Interestingly enough, Decembrio doesn't write at all about this work in his surviving letters, perhaps not finding it as worthy as his other works. To the Duke of Ferrara, Borso d'Este, he wrote a book on the plague, but none of these leaders gave him much thought. Sforza asked for his biography to be written in Italian as opposed to the Latin, this Decembrio did earnestly and elegantly but overall, Sforza wouldn't budge, the court was too busy to deal with Deembrio. The king of France, Louis XI, also received a gift from our protagonist, a Latin translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, a book that would influence whole new generations since its translation from the Greek into the popular languages. But Louis XI didn't really hire him, neither did Pius II offer him any worthy position as well. The new pope, moreover, was occupied in attempting to start a massive crusade against the Ottomans, which many of the Western powers were unable to do. In the year 1464, a year when Fortune threw surprising cards on Decembrio's fate. His wife, Caterina Bossi, who had been with him for forty years, had died leaving him a widower. A single man again, Decembrio was in his old age, and Sforza, perhaps pitying him, took this opportunity to introduce him to Battistina Camogli, she was a daughter of a Milanese noble, Battista degli Amadei, who had strong influence in the court. Decembrio accepted this newfound piece of

fortune and got married to her. Sforza had also crushed the resistance in Genoa and installed a puppet doge, regaining much influence in Italy while Pius II had died passing the throne to Pope Paul V. Here Decembrio had hopes that the new pope would be a favorable opportunity for better ties with Rome but the Paul V proved to be absurdly fanatical. He continued demanding the crusade that Pius II wanted but would refuse to work with Christians who favored utraquism in the council of Basel, yet the Venetians, led by the new doge Cristoforo Moro, kept pressing on in the Aegean, starting what's known as the First Ottoman-Venetian War (1463-1479). Here the Ottomans learned quickly how to rival Venice by building a fleet that could rival the serene republic and while many Christians were involved in this war, their efforts were limited and eclipsed by the Ottomans. No doubt this played right in Sforza's hands when he was able to take Genoa who likewise lost property in the Aegean to the Ottomans. But Decembrio despite being married to a new and wealthy woman was nevertheless, not able to challenge anybody in the Milanese court and gain a position. He tried in Siena as well but was rejected and also got into a squabble with his brother, Angelo Camilo, regarding the ownership of a house. In 1466, news of Sforza's death disturbed him, leaving Milan to the twenty-two year old, Galeazzo Maria Sforza as the new Duke, known for his savagery and debauchery.

VII

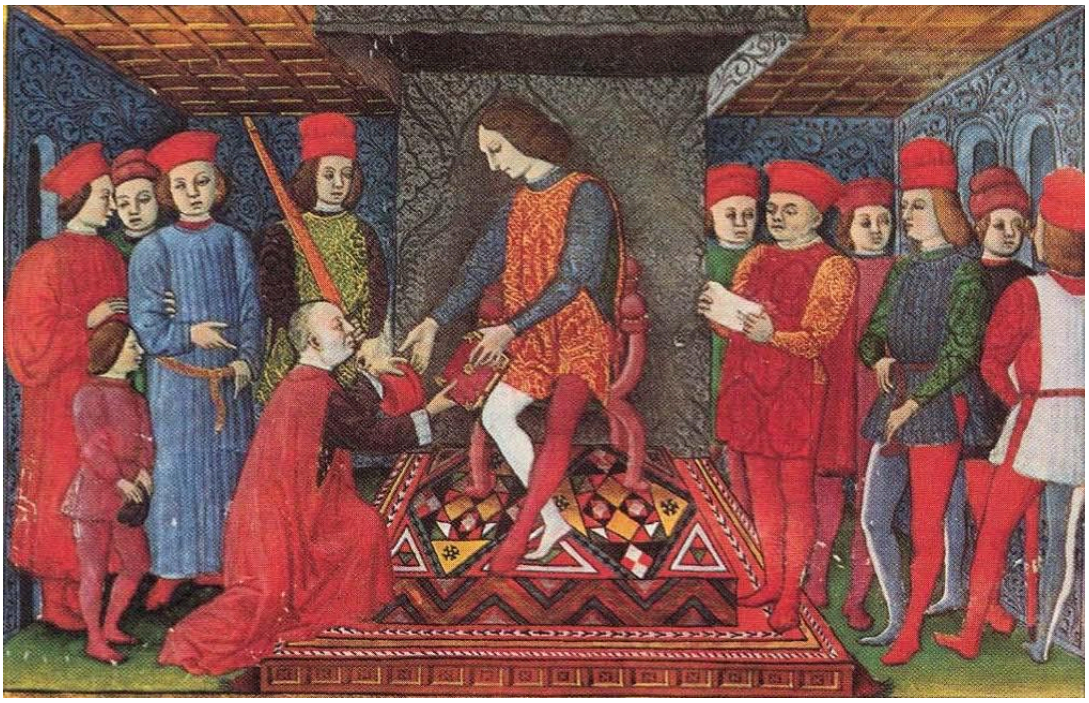
As a young man, our protagonist experienced the riotous reveling and paranoia of his employer, Filippo Maria. In his later life, he would experience the tyranny of another young duke, more cruel and outrageous than the former. This was Galeazzo Maria Sforza, cunning and shrewd, he had returned from France after helping Louis XI in his wars against Burgundy. Taking the throne, he looked even more to elevate the name of Sforza. But Fate would still have mercy on Decembrio and in 1467 he received the invitation to work under the patronage of Duke Borso d'Este of Ferrara. This was also when his younger brother died, leaving him the last Decembrio since he was childless. In his new home in Ferrara, Decembrio lived peacefully, he dedicated his time to his studies, translated a variety of works and reviewed contemporary works as well. The "Life of Saint Ambrose" by Guarino Veronese, for example, he disliked and criticized, writing his own version. Decembrio had moreover grown more firm and inflexible, he had become a respectable teacher as well in Ferrara, among his mostly recognized students are Niccolò da Correggio and the poet, Tito Vespasiano Strozzi, who was also a colleague of Angelo Camillo when he worked in Ferrara under Leonello. When Borso died in 1471 and left the throne to his half-brother, Ercole d'Este, who continued employing the now eighty-year old Decembrio and even went over to Rome to be recognized by the new pope, Sixtus IV, as a legitimate duke. This new pope, the successor of Paul V, was so furious at the Turks that he sent many galleys to join the Venetians in trying to fight the forces of Sultan Mehmet II. One remarkable thing he did was to start the creation of the Sistine Chapel for such were the ambitions of the popes in these times. He is also, moreover, famous for his bitter rivalry with the Florentine leader, Lorenzo de Medici, who had taken control of Florence since his father, Cosimo, had died. The 1470s were quite a time for patronage and Decembrio no doubt had the experience of knowing other literary figures in the Ferrara court such as Matteo Maria Boiardo who would write the iconic *Orlando Innamorato* and welcome the young Ariosto to the court. Among others include Pandolfo Collenuccio, Battista Guarini, and, Antonio Tebaldeo. Regarding music patronage, Ercole d'Este was a love of the Flemish school and patronized composers such as Alexander Agricola, Jacob Obrecht, Heinrich Isaac, Adrian Willaert and Josquin Desprez. His love of architecture and art also propelled him to fame, the school of Ferrara as it became known boasted illustrious painters like Francesco del Cossa and Cosmé Tura. Biagio Rossetti, his architect, would make many additions and renovations to the city of Ferrara that he radically changed the old medieval layout

of urban planning into a more modern one. Such were the gentlemen of the illustrious court of d'Este. His works on Roman history had the honor of being printed in Rome in 1471 and Venice in 1472 by Johann and Wendelin of Speyer, two Germans from Mainz who moved to the serene republic for business.

But while many of these remarkable things occurred, commotion at Milan's court raised tensions. It was remarked by one courtier that Decembrio's biography of Filippo Maria had made insulting and disrespectful comments about Sforza and his family. Outraged at being disrespected Galeazzo demanded an explanation from the old man. He was to return to Milan in 1473 and report this to the court, one of the gentemen who fought for his innocence was Nicodemo Trincandini, a diplomat of the Sforza court who had been Francesco Sforza's chancellor and close ally. The court of Galeazzo Sforza, howeevr, was known for its outrageous episodes, the Duke had married Bona of Savoy with whom he had two legitimate sons and two legitimate daughters, yet he had many illegitimate children. We learn from contemporaries such as Bernardino Corio that he lusted for both men and women, would rape the wives of other men, and had the most savage desire to torture those who crossed him including cutting off limbs, death by starvation, and even forcing a farmer to eat a dead rabbit until he choked to death. It must have truly been the love for his home town that pushed old Decembrio to return to Milan since he certainly couldn't play Seneca to the Galeazzo's Nero. It was Trincandini's admiration for Decembrio as an honorable writer that gained him merit in the eyes of Milan and was able to save himself from suffering a terrifying end at the hands of the brutal Duke. The aging translator would still try to make ammends and in 1475 returned to Milan definitively. He had many disagreements with the Duke yet in the following year wrote a strong letter saying "*sempre stato, da lo principio de la etate mia, servo de la illustrissima casa vostra, e così li miei de li maiori vostri, benché le mutatione de li tempi e la varietate de le cosse humane me abbiano desviato ad altrui servitii non per voluntate mea, ma per necessitate*" he then supplicates to the Duke to give him whatever position possible so that he may live honestly "*de provederme come a suo servo, quantunque indegno, de qualche officio o exercitio, che possa vivere il resto de la vita mia cum li miei honestamente*".

It is a curious thing why he couldn't remain in the court of Ercole d'Este, he did write for him a stunning biography as well, *De Laude et Commendatione Vitae Clarissimi Principis Herculensis Estensium Ducis Liber,* but perhaps his position in Ferrara wasn't as ideal as he

wanted it to be, after all, the court of Ferrara was a competitive place as well. In Milan, Galeazzo got a printing press, something that could replace copyists and his rule over Genoa, and illustrious patronage made him seem far from accessible to our protagonist. This savage Duke of Milan was not so inaccessible, however, to a group conspirators led by Giovanni Andrea Lampugnani, the illustrious Milanese Lampugnani family who were the victims of Galeazzo's machinations and lost their fortune. According to Corio, a contemporary writer of the time, the conspirators pretended to salute him and then ganged up on his person with daggers when he went to pray at the Basilica of San Stefano Maggiore, stabbing him fourteen times. Expiring in the street to the sorrow of his entourage, Galeazzo Sforza passed the throne to his eldest son. Lampugnani and his gang, on the other hand, took flight into the crowd of the city looking to reach their horses. He was finally caught when tripping over some women's garments, leading to the Duke's forces capturing him and imposing a sinister punishment of having his body mangled by horses and dragged throughout the streets. This occurred on December 26, 1476, allowing perhaps some respite to Decembrio who would have less than a year to live.



Gerolamo Mangiaria, *Audience of the Sforza Court at the time of Galeazzo Maria*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

The heir to the throne was Gian Galeazzo Maria Sforza at seven years old. This child's regent, his mother, Bona of Savoy, urged the cities to recognize her son and had the assistance of Galeazzo's chancellor, Cicco Simonetta, who became the grey eminence to the regency. Having

established himself a loyal partner of the Sforza family since its early days, he planned on cultivating the young Duke to be his ideal leader, but this was thwarted by Galeazzo's younger brother, the Duke's uncle, Ludovico Sforza, popularly known as "The Moor". He was able to divide Bona from Simonetta who soon felt overwhelmed by his rule that she reached out to her brother-in-law in the overthrow of Simonetta. Ludovico, much enthused about the prospect of ruling Milan, involved himself in all he could to crush Simonetta. This wild cast of characters did not serve, however, to be of any help for Decembrio, who still was unemployed albeit with a decent income.

VIII

The Milanese court of Decembrio's later life would not accept him as warmly as it once did, fortunately for Decembrio, his second wife, Battistina, was wealthy and the old man was able to repose in relative peace. Not being able to secure a patronage from Galeazze or Ludovico Sforza, he humbly remained in Milan until his death at the age of eighty-five years old on November 12, 1477. He was working on one final project, a massive epistolary work of his decades, detailing his life as a sort of autobiography via his communication with others. Including over 500 letters, the work can be seen as an epilogue of Decembrio's life, he carefully made different sections, divided the different chapters of his life, featuring over fifty years which paints a magnanimous picture of the 15th century. His dedication to courtly life and 'ducal humanism' was his greatest strength but also his greatest flaw, for he was perpetually in search of the ideal patron. We see his communication with the great luminaries of the age such as Antonio da Rho, Antonio Loschi, Gasparino Barzizza, Guarino Veronese, Francesco Barbaro, Ludovico Casella, Poggio Bracciolini, Leonardo Bruni, Niccolò Niccoli, Maffeo Vegio, Lorenzo Valla, Flavio Biondo, Bartolomeo Facio, Zenone Castiglioni, Nicolò and Tito Vespasiano Strozzi, together with illustrious rulers, Borso and Ercole d'Este, Federico da Montefeltro, Alfonso V of Aragon, and four popes: Eugenius IV, Nicholas V, Martin V and Pius II. The humanist had lived to see great moments of history such as the invention and distribution of the printing press, the fall of Constantinople, the voyage to Africa by Portugal, and the great surge of the classical tradition in Italy of which he was a part of. He died of a sickness in his small home in Milan. His wife, being his only heir, amassed his books and donated them to the monastery Santa Maria delle Grazie, where his body is buried in a marble sarcophagus.

As to what occurred in his magnificent Milan, the young Duke had a bitter conflict with his uncle, Ludovico, who was able to secure power in 1494 after Gian's death at twenty-five years old. Many suspected Ludovico of secretly having the Duke poisoned in order to seize the throne. The last Sforza to rule Milan was Ludovico's son, Francesco II, a weak leader who ruled until 1535 when the Duchy was absorbed into the expanding Habsburg empire. The Italy that Decembrio worked in would be overwhelmed by foreign powers, Austria, France, and Spain, yet the influence of the Italian poets, musicians, translators, and artists would come to resound around the globe and Decembrio's legacy, along with them.

~ END ~

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